

The Foundation of Catholic Belief

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FOREWORD

This booklet has been compiled with the idea of bringing together briefly in one place the matters which form the foundation of Catholic belief.

It is intended for Catholics who may wish to refresh their memory on things already learned. It may make clearer what was not fully grasped in younger days, especially the reason why we are so certain of the truth in all that the Church teaches.

It is possible the booklet will be a help to some non-Catholic readers in understanding the basis of the Catholic Faith. That would be a most welcome result.

Once a person grasps the fact that the Catholic Church is God's mouthpiece to men, planned and arranged deliberately by Our Divine Lord before His Ascension into Heaven, so that through it His voice would continue to reach men until the end, then the acceptance of the Catholic Faith united with its full practice is clearly seen to be the complete carrying out of God's will.

Our Lord in His mortal life gave the perfect example of devotedness in doing the Will of God. It was what He desired above all that men should do. "Blessed are they who hear the word of God and keep it."

GOD

Religion supposes the fact of God's existence. The word 'religion' means "that which binds us to God." It leads us to take account of Him in our lives and to discharge our duties to Him.

The fact of God's existence is something that man can know by the use of reason alone. There are to be found atheists who deny the existence of God. They have always formed a small minority of the human race, for although through the ages men have had many different ideas about the kind of Being God is, yet the human race as a whole at all times has had no doubt about His existence. Some of the minority who profess to be atheists do so because they see that to acknowledge God's existence would be to acknowledge a law of God and they wish to be a law unto themselves. Others have grown up with a prejudice against religion, perhaps because of what they consider injustice done them by people professing to be religious, and will have nothing to do with God or religion. Very few are atheists as a result of conviction born of deliberate reasoning about the existence of God.

The vast majority of men by what one may call the normal use of reason have seen that God exists.

Different lines of thought bring men to know this. If you go into a modern factory you will see there a collection of wonderful machinery. If you are not familiar with machinery, some one may explain to you how each machine works. You will admire the genius of the man who invented each machine you inspect, seen in his planning it, having the various parts made, fitting them together, getting the whole into working order to produce the thing he intended the machine to produce.

You would laugh at the idea that any such machine could be the result of chance, even the result of flinging together in a heap the parts of which it is made. You know that an intelligent being, a very intelligent one, was necessary to account for it.

Now in the world around us among the things of nature, as we say, there are many things far more wonderful than the most wonderful works of man. We do not have to go beyond ourselves for an example. The human body is more wonderful than any man-made machine. Each part performs a function which it was obviously intended for. The eyes were made for seeing, the ears for hearing, the heart to pump the life-blood of man through his body. The wonderful levers which we call the hands and legs were made for movement. There is the digestive system by which the body is built up and conserved. There is the marvellous power which man has of reproducing his kind. All these things and the rest that make up the human body demand an intelligent Being to account for them and could be far less the result of chance than the most complicated of man-made machines.

We think a camera is a remarkable invention, but it is nothing in comparison with the human eye. If it needed an intelligent being to account for it, much more does the eye of man, and, of course, the whole of the human body. This applies to the numberless and often extremely complicated things of the animal and vegetable kingdoms, too.

Again, we can reason to God's existence in a somewhat different way. You know in what numbers and how frequently the trains come in to a modern central railway station. Yet they come in in the most orderly fashion and an accident is practically an unheard of thing in the process.

Of course it is the signalling system, which may be an automatic one, that is responsible for the order. You know what would happen if the drivers just started their trains and let them run on, paying no regard to signals.

It is obvious that an intelligent being is required to "work out" any signalling system. It is the direct opposite of leaving things to chance. If a signalling system, which preserves the order we witness, works automatically it merely demands a higher degree of intelligence than a simpler system.

Now let us look at the universe of which our earth forms part. We think, even in these days, that the earth is a big place. Yet compared with other heavenly bodies it is very small. The sun is over a million times the size of the earth and situated some 92,000,000 miles away. Yet the sun itself is only a small star compared with so many other heavenly bodies which are at far greater distances from us.

Besides the size of the heavenly bodies and their vast distances from one another there is their colossal number. Each improvement of the telescope brings yet more and more of them under the notice of man, so that their number seems as if it had no limit. The heavenly bodies have movements of their own and move, too, in relation to one another, and the whole number is moving through space at immense speed, some hundreds of times faster than the speed of a shell fired from the best of the ordinary type of gun.

Yet the whole universe moves with the utmost order and regularity. So regular is it that scientists can, for example, calculate accurately when an eclipse of the sun will occur in the future or has occurred in the past.

Now if the signalling system at a great railway station - all the more wonderful if it is automatic - speaks to us of the high intelligence demanded to account for the order with which the many and frequent trains arrive, all the more does the order in the universe demand an intelligent Being to account for it.

There is a line of thought leading to the knowledge of God's existence which the greatest of the ancient philosophers considered conclusive. In the world around us, there is nothing, including ourselves, which can explain itself. Everything we know in the visible world depends on something else for its existence. Thus it has always been, within the knowledge of man.

A man depends for his life on his parents and they in turn on their parents and so on. The plant depends on a seed or shoot of some other plant. Even lifeless things like minerals and precious stones cannot explain themselves, but depend on chemical action and pressure brought to bear from outside. So it has always been in the experience of man. There never has been anything that could explain itself. Everything depends on something else, and has not the reason of its existence in itself.

Now, if you want an explanation of this long line of dependent things, you must come to some supremely independent Being, existing of necessity, Who depending on nothing outside Himself for His existence and therefore being uncaused existed always, and is the One responsible for that long series of dependent things which cannot explain themselves yet need explanation and demand an intelligence to account for them. This Being is God.

God is eternal - He always was and always will be - because He exists of necessity and with complete independence and so, owing His existence to none, never began to be and will never cease to be. Because of His supreme independence He is infinite, unlimited in His being and in His power, for there is none to hedge Him in in any way.

God is a spirit. He is in no way material. Anything material is made up of parts and needs something outside itself to bring those parts together. But God is dependent on nothing outside Himself for His existence and so is non-material. A non-material intelligent being is a spirit—a living being with free will and understanding not needing a body to make up its nature.

(Footnote: If we find it difficult to conceive the idea of a spiritual being it may help us to recall that we have a spiritual part in our own nature, namely our soul. We know we have a body because we can see it. We can be as certain we have a soul, because we do things which our body cannot account for, but which of their nature demand a spiritual, a non-material source. We can conceive abstract ideas. From a number of beautiful things, for example, we get the idea of "beauty," a non-material thing. We have consciousness of what we are doing. We can be conscious even of the act of thinking. These actions, along with the exercise of free-will including love, come from the spiritual part of ourselves, which we call our soul. No material part of us can account for them.)

Such then is God as seen by the light of reason. He is the supreme intelligent Being, spiritual, eternal, infinite, to Whom we along with all other things owe our existence.

REVELATION

Man, along with all other things, owes his existence to God. He therefore belongs to God. He is God's.

Now God must have had a purpose in making man. Being supremely intelligent He could not act blindly like a machine, for that would be against His nature. His purpose in making man must have been in some way connected with Himself and His own honour, for His action could not have been forced upon Him by anything outside Himself.

Since man is God's and exists for God, it is his duty to do what God has made him for. To do that he must find out just how he is to live for God and to honour Him. Man cannot rightly live as he pleases, taking no account of God in the use of his life. If he so lives, he fails in the very purpose of his existence, which is for God. By the use of reason alone man could know much of his duty to God. However, the human race as a whole, left to itself, failed to find out clearly what man's duty to God was. (There is a reason for that and it is to be found in original sin and the fall of the human race, although we are merely concerned here with the fact, not the reason for it.)

Since the duty of honouring God by one's life remained, we might expect that God Himself would make known how it was to be done, seeing that men failed to learn it themselves. Moreover, in the supposition that God wanted men to know things about Himself which they could not possibly know by the use of reason alone, it would be necessary for Him to make these things known. There can be no doubt that God could so enlighten men. He Himself gave them the power to pass on their thoughts and the knowledge they acquired to other men, so He Himself could make known to them anything He wished them to know.

The question is did He make Himself known or reveal Himself, and if so how did He do it? God did reveal Himself and make known what He desired of men. He enlightened certain men and sent them as His messengers to other men. Such were the prophets of the Old Law and such in a special way was Our Lord Jesus Christ.

As men could reasonably ask by what right those claiming to speak in the name of God expected to be believed, God gave to those who truthfully claimed to speak for Him (for not all those who made the claim did so truthfully) certain signs, by which it could be known for certain that they came from Him.

These signs were the power to work miracles and the power to make prophecies. A miracle is an event, visible to the senses, above the order of nature of such a kind that it can be put down to God alone. To raise the dead to life for instance, as Our Lord Jesus Christ is related to have done in the case of Lazarus who was four days dead and whose body was already corrupting, is something quite beyond human power and could be possible by the power of God alone. To cure leprosy by a mere word is likewise something quite beyond human power. Leprosy can be cured sometimes only and after a period of treatment. To cure it as Our Lord is related to have done in response to a leper's request, "If You will, You can make me clean," by the mere words, "I will: be you made clean" is something beyond human power and possible only to God's power.

Similarly to foretell in detail future events which are quite beyond human knowledge or guess-work is for those who see them come to pass evidence that they were foretold under divine enlightenment, for God alone can know future events including those which depend for their fulfilment on the free will of man.

Now, the prophets of the Old Law and in a special way Our Lord Jesus Christ claimed to speak to men in the name of God bearing His message to them. In support of that claim they often worked miracles and made true prophecies. These things, possible only to divine power, showed that they had the divine backing, that God was with them and using His power through them. Such things showed, when appealed to in support of the claim to speak for God, that that claim was made truthfully and that what was spoken was spoken in God's name.

We, as Christians, are particularly interested in the claims of Our Lord Jesus Christ, and in what He taught of God's plan for man and man's duty towards God. To learn of Our Lord and His teaching we must go to the Gospels, which give the history of His life.

THE GOSPELS

The written record which we have of Our Lord's life, His claims, and His teachings is contained in the four Gospels. They were written approximately between the years 50 and 100 A.D., St. Matthew's being the first written and St. John's the last.

With the exception of St. Matthew's Gospel, they were written in Greek, then a universal language. St. Matthew wrote in Aramaic, the language used in Palestine in Our Lord's time. But an early Greek translation gives us his Gospel, which has not come down to us in its original Aramaic.

The original Gospels written by the very Evangelists themselves do not exist, but many copies of them, some going back to the early fourth century, give us what they wrote. (Preserved pages from whole Gospels going back to at least 150 A.D., have also been recently unearthed.)

It is not to be wondered at that the original Gospels themselves did not endure, as they were written on a comparatively flimsy kind of paper, made from the pith of the papyrus reed; but when parchment began to be widely used for writing on, greater durability was given to the written word.

Many other ancient writings besides the Gospels have come down to us, some of them dating back to times before Our Lord's coming. These include the works of history, poetry, philosophy and the rest which were the products of ancient Greece and Rome. Some of them are studied today by students of the classical languages. None of the manuscript copies of these works dates back as far as the oldest copies we have of the Gospels, nor are they by any means as numerous. Yet scholars accept them as genuinely reproducing the works composed in antiquity.

There is more reason for accepting the Gospels as the genuine writing of those who were in a position to know Our Lord's life, than there is for accepting as genuine the other ancient writings which all scholars receive.

It would be hard to find other ancient documents so well known soon after they were written as the Gospels were. They are quoted from again and again by the earliest Christian writers and soon we are told about them and their authors. The words of St. Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyons (+202) are an example of this latter point. He came from the east and was a disciple of St. Polycarp, who lived at the same time as St. John the Apostle.

He tells us that Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, each wrote a Gospel.

The Gospels themselves ring true. It is beyond possibility that both the character of Our Lord and the nobility of His teachings as set out in the Gospels could be the result of an invention intended to mislead men. They are not written in a way calculated to win popular favour at the time of their first appearance, for they make many demands of men in themselves little in keeping with human inclination. Their writers have little or nothing to say directly of themselves. What little there is seems mostly to their discredit. They were obviously not seeking a reputation for themselves.

Many of the events they narrate are very wonderful, yet they were accepted as true by those in a position to investigate closely their truthfulness. The Gospels also find support from the history of secular events recorded elsewhere.

All these things go to prove that the Gospels are genuine and contain the truth. We must accept them as the real history of Our Lord's life and teaching.

JESUS CHRIST IS GOD

As the Gospels make clear, Our Lord Jesus Christ claimed to teach men with divine authority. "My testimony is true . . . because I am not alone, but the Father that sent Me is with me . . . and the Father that sent Me gives testimony of Me" (John 8:14; 16-18); "I am come in the name of my Father" (John 5:43).

He claimed to speak in a way meant for the whole world. "This Gospel shall be preached in the whole world" (Matt. 24:14). Later to the apostles He said: "Going, teach all nations. Preach the Gospel to every creature" (Matt. 28:19; Mark 16:15).

He said that men must heed Him, under pain of being finally condemned if they did not. "He that believes not, shall be condemned" (Mark 16:16).

These were extraordinary claims to make, yet they were not the greatest of His claims. He claimed also to be more than man. He claimed to be God.

If that claim is true there will be no difficulty in accepting the others, and His right to teach the whole world and to demand that men accept His teaching will be quite clear.

That claim is true. Jesus Christ is God because He claimed to be God and He proved His claim to be true.

Jesus Christ claimed to be God.

He said to the Jews on one occasion, "I and the Father are one" (meaning "one being"), and we are told that they took up stones to cast at Him "for blasphemy, because that you, being a man, make yourself God" (John 10:30-33).

On another occasion when the leaders of the Jews took exception to Our Lord's curing the infirm man by the pool of Bethesda on the Sabbath, maintaining that He was breaking the Sabbath, He said to them: "My Father works until now and I work" (John 5:17), claiming that just as the Father having created all things, kept them in being by the exercise of His power, Sabbath day and all, so too He was as independent as the Father in what He did, even on the Sabbath day. The Jews when they heard this reply "sought the more to kill him because He did not only break the Sabbath but also said that God was His Father making Himself equal to God" (John 5:16-18).

On yet another occasion Our Lord told the Jews that Abraham the founder of their race (who had lived some 2000 years before) had looked forward to the day of His coming and rejoiced at the thought of it. The Jews said to Our Lord: "You are not yet fifty years old, and have You seen Abraham?" He replied: "Before Abraham was made, I am" (John 8:58). They took up stones to cast at Him for this reply. In it, besides claiming to exist before His life on earth began, He used words of Himself such as God had used to Moses when asked by Moses who He was. He had said: "I am who am," that is "I am the one who exists in the fullest sense of the word, independently of all else."

Again in His prayer after the Last Supper Our Lord addressed His Father "Glorify You Me, O Father . . . with the glory which I had, before the world was, with You" (John 16:5).

Addressing the Father once more He said: "All My things are Yours, and Yours are Mine" (John 17:10), even as we read of His telling the apostles at an earlier time, "No one knows the Son but the Father, neither does anyone know the Father but the Son" (Matt. 11:27). By these words He puts Himself on the same level as the Father. He claims that He alone knows the Father fully. To do this He must be divine, for no merely human being could know God fully or put himself on the same level as God.

When some months before His death He asked the apostles who men thought He was, they told Him some of the current opinions men had of Him. When He asked them what they thought, St. Peter replied: "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God" (Matt. 16:16). Then Our Lord pronounced him blessed and told him He knew this not by any human knowledge, but by the direct divine enlightenment of the Father Himself. If St. Peter had merely meant that Our Lord was a "son of God" in the way in which any devout Jew would consider himself to be, he would not have needed any special divine enlightenment to know this of Our Lord. He must, therefore, by Our Lord's own words have meant something more than this. He could have meant only that Our Lord was the true Son of God, having Himself the divine nature, and so that He was God.

Before the High Council of the Jews when Our Lord was brought in after His betrayal, the high priest sought for witnesses whose word would lead to His condemnation, but without success. Finally, he put Our Lord on His oath to say if He were "the Christ the Son of God." When Our Lord replied that He was, the high priest accused Him of blasphemy and all on that score decided He should be put to death. (Matt. 26:63). There would be no question of blasphemy - speaking in a way gravely dishonouring God - if Our Lord and the high priest had merely meant "son of God" in a sense in which any Jew might claim the title for himself. There was question here of much more - of a claim to be the real Son of God, having the divine nature, and so to be God.

When we remember Our Lord's forgiving sins in His Own name and for sorrow shown in His regard, as He did in the case of Mary Magdalen, and when we remember His claiming to be the Light of the World and the very Truth itself, we see that He acted in a way no mere man could, and claimed for Himself what no mere man could claim.

It is important to remember how Our Lord's words were understood. We find that both His friends and His enemies understood Him to claim to be God. The Jews sought to kill Him and in the end condemned Him to death because they understood that He, a man, was making Himself God. The apostles understood His claim in the same way. In the introduction to his Gospel St. John says: "In the beginning was the Word (when creation began the Word - Whom he later identifies with Our Lord - already existed), the Word was with God and the Word was God," and then, "the Word was made flesh (became man) and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, the glory as it were of the only-begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:1-14). The Word then was God and the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us. St. Thomas, after his doubts concerning Our Lord's Resurrection had vanished, hailed Him: "My Lord and My God" (John 20:28). In St. Paul's Epistles we find the apostle saying of Our Lord: "Who being in the form of God thought it not robbery to be equal with God" (Phil. 2:6) and "Christ . . . Who is over all things God blessed for ever" (Rom 9:5), and in other places referring to Him in a way that could be used only of God.

It is clear, then, that by both His friends and His enemies Our Lord's words were understood to claim for Himself that He was divine.

We believe that Our Lord is God not merely because He claimed to be God, but because He also proved that His word is true.

The truth of Our Lord's word is clear first of all from His perfect character as man. Even those who do not accept Christianity admit that Christ was the most perfect man who ever walked this earth. We must therefore believe He is the soul of truth and honour and accept His word including His claim to be God, or else say that the most perfect of men was either a liar or suffering from self deception. Either idea is, of course, quite untenable. His word is to be accepted as true.

Again, there are Our Lord's miracles which prove that He had the divine backing for what He said. He raised the dead to life, He cured the lepers by a mere word, He healed the sick, sometimes even when they were not present, but had friends or relations who came to Our Lord and besought His help on their behalf. He fed the multitudes in the desert on a few loaves and fishes. By His word He calmed the stormy sea.

All these things and other like them were beyond human power to accomplish. Our Lord appealed to His works as a reason why men should believe in Him. "Though you will not believe me, believe the works. The works that I do give testimony of me" (John 10:38&25). That was reasonable, for they showed at least that His Father in Heaven was working through Him, backing Him up, as it were, by putting His power at Our Lord's disposal. So His miracles show that His words had the divine authority behind them; that His claim to be divine, as well as other things He said, was vouched for by His Father in Heaven.

In a special way the Resurrection of Our Lord from the dead proves His divinity.

Our Lord on several occasions foretold the manner of His death and that on the third day He would rise again (Matt. 17:9; 20:18 & 19). When He did this He gave men the best of all opportunities to test the truth of His word. If He did not rise again after foretelling that He would, then men need no longer believe Him. But if He did rise again, this was so extraordinary a thing to foretell and have come to pass that His word would be proved true beyond any shadow of doubt.

Our Lord died on the Cross. The soldiers sent to hasten the death of the three crucified on Good Friday found Our Lord already dead. The scourging itself had brought Him close to death. One of the soldiers, however, to make sure, ran his spear into Our Lord's side. When Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate's leave to take Our Lord's body for burial, Pilate sent for the Centurion who had been at Calvary to make sure that He was already dead, and when the officer reported that He was, Pilate gave permission for His friends to take His body.

The next day the chief priests and Pharisees came to Pilate saying: "That seducer said while He was yet alive 'After three days I will rise again' " (Matt. 27:63). They therefore asked Pilate that the sepulchre be guarded lest His disciples come and take His body and say He was risen. They were satisfied that Our Lord was dead and then bore witness, too, to His prophecy that He would rise again.

On the Sunday morning the holy women, coming to the sepulchre to complete the embalming of Our Lord's body, found the stone rolled back from the entrance and the tomb empty. They were told by an angel that Our Lord had risen. It was not long before He began to appear to His followers.

First He appeared to Mary Magdalen, then to the other holy women, to St. Peter, to the two disciples going to Emmaus and also to the ten apostles gathered together, Thomas being absent. The apostles would not believe it was He. He invited them to feel Him, for "a spirit had not flesh and bones as they saw Him to have" (Luke 24:39) and He even ate with them, so that they could no longer doubt it was He, bodily present. However, they could not convince Thomas on his return. He demanded to be enabled to put his finger into the place of the nails in Our Lord's hands and his hand into His side before he would believe. A week later Our Lord came to His apostles again and gave Thomas the opportunity to do what he had demanded. He fell at the feet of Our Lord confessing Him to be his Lord and his God.

During the time between His resurrection and His ascension into Heaven Our Lord continued to come to His followers, sometimes to groups of the apostles, once to more than 500 gathered together (I Cor. 15:6), until He took His final leave of them and ascended into Heaven.

Our Lord proved beyond doubt the fact of His resurrection and with it the truth of His word. In foretelling His resurrection He had given men an extraordinary means of testing His truthfulness. With the resurrection a fact, His word could not be doubted and His claims, including His claim to be God, were proved to be true.

"If Christ be not risen again, then is our preaching vain," said St. Paul (I Cor. 15:14), but Christ had risen and on the strength of His resurrection men, who were able to satisfy themselves about it, came in great numbers to accept the Christian Faith even though it demanded of them sacrifices which naturally speaking they would have been little inclined to make.

Christ then claimed to be God.

(Footnote: Our Lord's referring to Himself as the "Son of God" does not imply any inferiority to God the Father for anyone who recalls that part of Christ's revelation which deals with the Blessed Trinity - the Persons of the Father, Son and Holy Ghost in the oneness of the Godhead.)

Christ, by His character, His miracles, and especially His resurrection, proved the truth of His word. Therefore we must accept His claim as true and acknowledge Him for what He is, the Great God of Heaven and earth made man for us.

Since He is God, Our Lord's claims to speak in a way intended for the whole world and in a way men must heed under pain of condemnation if they refuse, are claims that will be readily admitted. There is a clear obligation on all to hear the words of God made man.

JESUS CHRIST FOUNDED A CHURCH

Jesus Christ, Who was God, made it clear that He came on earth to bring forgiveness of sins and to give men life, the everlasting life of Heaven and what was necessary for it. He made it equally clear that it was necessary for men to believe His teachings and obey His commandments in order to reach Heaven. He spent only a short time teaching men Himself and did not go much beyond the small country of Palestine in doing so. Yet, as He had said, His gospel was for the whole world and to be believed by all men. He must, then, have made some provision to bring His words to men throughout the world and that for all time. He did this by founding His Church and setting up the Apostles as the authority in it to be His mouthpiece to men, giving them His own power to teach and rule.

What reason is there for saying this, and what, in the first place, do we mean by a Church?

When we say Our Lord founded a Church, we mean by a Church a religious society.

A society is a group of men gathered together under an authority for a common purpose, and having at their disposal the ways and means to enable them to do what they are united for. There are many examples of societies amongst us. A cricket club is one such example. It is made up of a number of members, who are banded together to promote interest in the game of cricket. They elect an authority to conduct the affairs of the club and by subscriptions and other means make available the funds necessary to equip and maintain their team.

The State in which we live is the highest form of a human society. In it, men living together in a country elect a Government and give it the authority to govern - to make laws, to enforce them, to gather taxes - in order to enjoy those advantages which should come to all from living in civilized society.

Our Lord founded His Church as a religious society. He spoke before His death of the Church He would found (Matt. 16:18). At Pentecost, when for the first time after His Ascension His followers showed themselves to the world, they appeared as already forming a religious society for which He was responsible. The Acts of the Apostles shows us the group of disciples of Christ, recognizing the Apostles as the authority amongst them, joined together to honour God and achieve salvation in the way pointed out by Christ, and having at their disposal, besides the teaching of Christ, such helps as Baptism and the power of forgiving sins to enable them to live as Christ's followers. Here was Christ's Church.

What were the characteristics He intended it to have?

It was certainly visible. The followers of Our Lord could be picked out as a special group of men and were soon given the name "Christians" to describe them (Acts 11:26).

His Church was meant by Our Lord to be lasting. Before His death when speaking of it He said, "the gates of hell" - the strongest powers of the evil one - would never overcome it (Matt. 16:18). When he commissioned the Apostles to go forth to teach men for Him, He promised to be with them (living on in their successors), "all days even to the consummation of the world" (Matt. 28:20). Similarly He had promised that the Spirit of Truth would abide with them "forever" (John 14:16, 17).

Christ meant His Church to be one. He spoke only of His Church, never of His churches. He compared it to a kingdom and a sheepfold - units, single entities. He prayed that His followers might be one (John 17:20, 21), and the prayer of Christ avails, so that where the true and full followers of Christ are there will be unity. He called Himself with justice the Truth, and Truth is one. It is not something that exists in one way in the mind of one man and in the opposite way in the mind of another. It has objective reality and unless we conceive Christ as being self contradictory we must look for unity and not contradiction in His teaching. He made this clear when He told the Apostles to teach men in His name "to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded" (Matt. 28:20). If men obeyed His command and accepted all things that He taught, then they would all accept the same things and there would be unity. This was what Our Lord intended.

The Church founded by Christ was holy. He Himself was all holy. He came to make men holy. His teaching was all directed to this end. His object in making provision for His work to go on and for His teaching to reach all men - the very object of His Church then - was to make it possible for men throughout the ages to become holy and reach eternal life. To His Church He left the means of bringing men the divine help they needed to live as He desired. These helps are to be found, for instance, in Baptism, the power of forgiving sins, and the Eucharist - all committed to the care of the authority He set up in His Church.

A most important quality of the Church founded by Christ is its universality. Even before His death Our Lord said His Gospel was to be preached in the whole world (Matt. 24:14). Before His Ascension He ordered the Apostles to teach "all nations" (Matt. 28:19), to preach the Gospel to "every creature" (Mark 16:15). To be conscious, then, at all times of this world-wide commission embracing all races and all grades of society is a necessary mark of the Church founded by Our Lord.

It is most important to note that Our Lord meant His Church to be apostolic. He set up the Apostles as the authority over His Church. He gave them the powers of teaching and ruling in His name and to their care He entrusted the special helps He left to make men holy. He intended His Church to last, as we have seen, and therefore intended the powers He gave to the Apostles to pass on to their successors. This we see the Apostles themselves understood from the Acts of the Apostles and their Epistles. Our Lord chose the Apostles from amongst His followers. He gave them practice, along with others, in teaching in His name before His death. He spoke of a power to rule men which He would give them - "Whatsoever you shall bind upon earth shall be bound also in Heaven and whatsoever you shall loose upon earth shall be loosed also in Heaven" (Matt. 18:18). To St. Peter He promised this power is a special and personal way (Matt. 16:19).

After His Resurrection Our Lord gave His commission to them saying “As the Father has sent me, I also send you” (John 20:21). Their commission was the same as His own. As He had taught with divine authority, so should they. As he had acted as law-giver for the good of men’s souls, so should they.

To them He said: “Going therefore, you all teach all nations . . . teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you and behold I am with you” (Matt, 28:19, 20). “He that believes and is baptized shall be saved: but He that believes not shall be condemned” (Mark 16:16).

Since the authority Our Lord gave to the Apostles was His own authority, as we might expect, to those whom He made His mouthpiece to men, He spoke such words as guaranteed them against error when they were carrying out His commission. He promised in general that the gates of hell would not prevail against His Church, as they surely would if it fell into error and led men astray in the matters in which it was to act for Him. He promised that “the Spirit of Truth” would abide with the Apostles “forever” (John 14:16, 17) and where the Spirit of Truth is there can be no error. He promised that He Himself would be with the Apostles even as they taught, so that if there were any error it would have to be put down to Him, which is unthinkable. Moreover, He said that all men must believe the teaching of the Apostles under pain of being condemned if they refused to believe, but He could not in justice condemn men for refusing to believe what might be wrong. That threat carried with it a guarantee that there would be no error.

Such was the Church founded by Our Lord almost two thousand years ago—a religious society, visible and lasting, one, holy, universal, founded on the authority of the Apostles (which was Christ’s own authority) and infallible.

Here then was Christ’s arrangement for reaching men through the ages - His Church. Through the Apostolic Authority He set over it, His own divine words would still reach the ears of men. The power of teaching and ruling which He gave to that authority was His own divine power to teach and His own divine power to rule, and all power was His in Heaven and on earth. When this authority functioned, then, it was no human voice that men heard but the divine voice of Christ Himself.

THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IS CHRIST’S CHURCH

In the world today there are many claimants of the Christian name. They are mainly the Orthodox Church, the Protestant Churches, and the Catholic Church.

All are different from one another, one often asserting what the others deny. Where there are such differences, all cannot be right, for Truth is one and Christ is the Truth and not self-contradictory. He did not leave it to men to work out for themselves by what way they were to serve God. He pointed out one way - His way - and that way alone is right.

In the midst of the differences His Church is still to be found, otherwise His guarantees, the guarantees of God made man, go for nothing.

That Church which has qualities identical with those of the Church founded by Our Lord so long ago will be shown to be His Church, and the rest will forfeit the right to call themselves by His name.

As has been pointed out, besides the Catholic Church the main claimants of the Christian name are the Orthodox Church and the Protestant Churches. The Orthodox Church came into being as a distinct Church accepting all the Catholic Sacraments and Teachings but rejecting the role of the successor to Peter, in Rome, first in the ninth century when Photius, patriarch of Constantinople, led the Church in Greece away from unity with the Pope. The schism was healed, but renewed under Michael Cerularius, another patriarch of Constantinople in the eleventh century. Since that time it has continued in existence and the schism has been mainly exacerbated by nationalistic pride rather than theological controversy. The Orthodox Church is found mostly in Balkan countries and in parts of the Middle East. It is widespread in Russia though suffering under the cruel tyranny of communism. What claims has it to be considered the true Church of Christ?

Its members are one in belief but there is no unity of government. They attain to a high degree of holiness, still having the Mass and the Sacraments in use amongst them, but some argue that the holiness of the saints is no longer there. It is in no sense universal, being confined to a small group of countries. Moreover, at no time in its history since its separation from unity with the See of Peter has it looked upon it as an essential duty to spread the faith it has amongst all nations, and this is a necessary mark of the Church of Christ. (In fairness, it has faced enormous obstacles in combating the tyrannies of ‘Christian’ monarchs and antagonistic Moslem and Communist enemies. Catholicism itself has had many a life and death struggle against similar opponents, but has always finally emerged both victorious and missionary.) It does not claim to be infallible. Indeed, some can be found who argue that those who exercise authority in the Orthodox Church cannot claim that that authority comes from the Apostles since, without Peter and his successor, there can be no binding decisions made for the Orthodox Church, such as were decided at the first seven Ecumenical Councils. It is, then, not identical with the Church founded by Our Lord.

Protestantism came into being in the sixteenth century, some 400 years ago or so, at what is called erroneously the Reformation. Luther, who began in the name of reform, soon led what was really a revolt against Christianity as accepted through the centuries. What was brought into being as a result of the revolt was a new thing and therefore not Our Lord's. Any claim that Protestantism was a return to original Christianity meant that there was a time when Our Lord's Church failed, and so His promises that His Church would endure and that the Spirit of Truth would continue with it always had gone for nothing.

From setting out to attack abuses connected with the granting of Indulgences, Luther passed on to attack the doctrine of Indulgences itself and from that other fundamental teachings of the faith, until he had something very different from Christianity as understood till that time.

(Footnote on abuses: There were abuses not only in connection with the granting of indulgences in Luther's day, but also in the granting of Church dignities and offices, and moreover in the lives of many clerics and members of the laity. These abuses were set right by the Church through the Council of Trent, but in the beginning they helped Luther, who claimed to be a reformer, although his character and actions belied the claim.)

Luther denied free will, said man was always in the state of sin and was saved without good works, by faith alone (by which he meant rather trust in Christ). He rejected as means of grace the Sacraments including the priesthood, although retaining the names of Baptism, Eucharist, and Penance for something different from what Christian Sacraments were understood to be till that time. He declared that the Bible as each one understood it himself was the sole source from which each one got his Christian faith. (Footnote: There are many reasons why "the Bible alone privately interpreted" is not the way by which to know the Christian faith. Nowhere does the Bible itself lay down such a rule so that to hold the rule one must contradict oneself. The Christian faith was already accepted and practised by men before a word of the New Testament - the most important part of the Bible for a Christian - was written. It was not complete for many years after the founding and spread of the Church. The Bible is written in languages that many do not understand. Until printing was invented in the fifteenth century the number of Bibles available was very small, so that if every man had to consult it for himself in order to have the Christian faith, it would have been an impossible task. To seek the Christian faith from the Bible by each one's own private understanding of it could not fail to result in as many different versions of that faith as there were differences in individual understanding of the Bible. The differences and contradictions among Protestants about what is to be believed is proof that this rule was none of Our Lord's making. To bring the faith to men Our Lord appointed Apostles and told them to "go and teach" promising to be with them as they did.)

Somewhat later, Calvin in Switzerland gave form and cohesion to the Protestant system although differing from Luther considerably. He held with Luther that the Bible alone privately interpreted was the sole rule of faith, but reduced the so called Sacraments to two, Baptism and Eucharist, and taught absolute predestination, i.e., that God made some men for Heaven and others for hell.

Lutheranism spread in parts of Germany, in the Netherlands, and in Scandinavia, where secular princes were glad to be free from ecclesiastical authority and ready to enrich themselves by taking Church property from those who they were told had no title to it. Without the backing of the princes it would not have spread. Calvin found followers in France, where they came to be called Huguenots, and in Scotland through John Knox's activity, where they were called Presbyterians.

In England following Henry the Eighth's breach with the Pope, during the short reign of the boy king, Edward VI, Protestantism was spread by the members of the Council of State to secure themselves and other in the possession of Church property and, after a short break during the reign of the Catholic Queen Mary, was by the latter part of Elizabeth's reign forced on the majority of the people. Protestantism, split as it is into so many differing sects, cannot be regarded as a single body nor can any individual group rightly claim to be the Church founded by Christ.

The unity which Our Lord meant His Church to have is wanting. No group is one in doctrine. There are for instance in the Church of England, the High Church, the Low Church, and the Centre Group. Individuals even within a given group differ from one another in belief. Some Presbyterians hold that Christ is God, others deny it and so on. There is no one governing authority in any group which when it teaches or makes laws is, or can expect to be, accepted and obeyed by all.

Although there are many very good Protestants, yet in the Protestant Churches the holiness of the saints is wanting, and from Protestantism the inspiration and help necessary to make the sacrifice high sanctity calls for is sought in vain.

Protestantism is not universal. In fact, in its origin, it took the form of a national religion and in its various forms for centuries continued as such, without any consciousness of a duty to spread the faith it claimed to hold amongst the pagan nations of the world. This alone is enough to show that it is not the Church of Christ. This holds despite what present day missionary activity there is, which is of recent origin and, as it were, an after-thought.

Protestantism in any of its forms is not apostolic. It cannot claim to have, through unbroken succession from the Apostles, either what authority it lays claim to, or its teachings. It makes no claim to speak with a voice that cannot err. In no sense is it the voice of Christ bringing His teaching to men.

The Catholic Church alone can claim to be identical with that Church established by Our Lord nearly two thousand years ago.

It has, as Our Lord intended His Church to have, unity of faith, all its members believing the same doctrines, and unity of government, all submitting to the ruling authority of the Pope.

The Catholic Church is holy. Not that all Catholics are holy by any means. On this point Our Lord Himself made it clear that there would be good and bad in His Church. But its teachings are holy, calculated to make men holy, inculcating with unchanging voice humility, charity, chastity, the sanctity of marriage and the sacredness of human life, among other things which find little favour in the world of today. Moreover, it has ever been able to put at the disposal of its children, mainly in the Sacraments and the Sacrifice of the Mass, the means which, if they will use them to the full, will bring them to the highest degrees of holiness. The wonders of holiness in the lives of the saints, which must be known to be appreciated, have come from their using to the full the help and inspiration the Catholic Church has given them. From the same source great numbers have been enabled to sacrifice all that men hold dear, in order to follow the teaching of Our Lord more perfectly in a life dedicated exclusively to Him and the care of souls, in monastery and convent.

The Catholic Church is universal, knowing no national boundaries but spread among all nations and also among all grades of society. It has ever regarded it as a sacred duty to spread the faith it holds among those who know it not. In every age its missionaries have gone forth over the world even when, as at the time of the Reformation, it seemed overwhelmed with difficulties where it was long established. It has always been obedient to the command of Christ: "Teach all nations."

The Catholic Church, is apostolic, able to trace back its authority and its teachings to the time of the Apostles, who find their successors in the Pope and its bishops. It claims, as the mouth-piece of Christ to men must claim, to speak with an unerring voice in regard to the things that are Christ's - whatever concerns Christian faith and morality.

The Catholic Church alone can rightly claim to be identical with the Church founded by Our Lord. It alone is the true Church, and the teaching and ruling authority in it is a divine teaching and ruling authority, set up by Our Lord Himself to bring His words to men for all time.

THE POPE

To complete the picture of Our Lord's arrangements for His Church, reference must be made to the position of supreme authority to which He appointed St. Peter and which He wished the successors of St. Peter to occupy after Him.

On the first occasion that He met St. Peter we are told that Our Lord fixed His gaze on him and said: "You are Simon the Son of Jona - you shall be called 'Cephas,' (in the language Our Lord spoke) which is interpreted 'Peter'," {or 'Rock'} as St. John points out (John 1:42). A similar remark was not addressed to any of the others who came to join Him and it is worth noting that when in the Old Testament we read of God's changing a man's name, it is when He intended him to take up a new and higher office. St. Peter is mentioned first in the lists of the Apostles although he was not the first to join Our Lord. He, with James and John, was one of the privileged three on several occasions in the life of Our Lord. Frequently we find him speaking to Our Saviour in the name of the other Apostles, as already having a recognized position among them.

About six months before His death, Our Lord promised to make him the foundation and support of the Church He would found. It was on the occasion when Our Lord, having questioned the Apostles as to who men said He was, St. Peter answered: "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God." Then came Our Lord's reply and with it the promise of the primacy: "Blessed are you Simon, son of Jona, because flesh and blood have not revealed it to you but My Father Who is in Heaven and I say to you: You are Peter (i.e., the rock) and upon this rock (upon you) I will build My Church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. And I will give to you the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven, and whatsoever you shall bind on earth it shall be bound also in Heaven and whatsoever you shall loose on earth it shall be loosed also in Heaven" (Matt. 16:16-19).

In this reply Christ compared the Church that is to be, to a house built on a rock. As the rock foundation gives firmness and durability to the house, so will Peter give stability to the Church. He will make it so firm that the strongest powers of the evil one (the gates of hell) shall not destroy it. Now it is the supreme authority in any society which gives it stability, hence St. Peter's position from which the Church of Christ was to get its firmness was to be one of supreme authority over it.

Then too, St. Peter was promised the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven. Among the Jews to say a man had the keys of a household signified that he was in charge of its affairs. The master of a household going away and leaving a man in charge would be said to be giving him the power of the keys. St. Peter, then, was to hold a similar position of authority over those wishing to enter heaven by the way Our Lord would appoint - through His Church.

Peter also was to receive in a special way the power to bind and loose. The other Apostles, it is true, were to have a similar power but it was to be understood in the light of the special power promised to St. Peter and to be exercised in subordination to his. To him in a special way would it belong to make laws or to annul them, to rule with an authority guaranteed in Heaven.

Our Lord gave a confirmation of these promises on the solemn occasion of the Last Supper with His Apostles. He remarked to St. Peter that they would all be assailed by Satan, "but," He added, "I have prayed for you (singular) that your (singular) faith fail not" - whatever about his courage - and Our Lord went on to say that Peter would be the one through whom, in the end, the others would be confirmed in loyalty to Himself (Luke 22:31, 32).

It was after the Resurrection that Our Lord kept the promises made to St. Peter. On one occasion before His Ascension into Heaven, He came to a group of His disciples by the Sea of Tiberias. There He asked Peter three times did he love Him. He received in answer a threefold declaration of love. Our Lord said to him, "Feed My lambs. Tend . . . (and) feed my sheep," (John 21:15-17).

The whole flock - all the members of His Church - were committed by the Good Shepherd Himself to one who was to be the shepherd in His place when He had left this earth. Peter's office and duty it would be to shield, guide, and rule the Church, exercising supreme authority in the name of his Divine Master, as completely as a shepherd would control his flock.

In the Acts of the Apostles we find that St Peter was pre-eminent among the Apostles after Our Lord's Ascension. There is reference to "Peter and those with him," "Peter and the Apostles." He worked extraordinary miracles and was the one to whom it fell by divine arrangement to receive the first Gentiles into the Church.

Since the Church was to last just as Our Lord had founded it "till the consummation of the world," Peter was to have successors and since the members of the Church would always need the same pastor's care, those successors were also to have the supreme authority which Christ set up precisely that the gates of hell might not prevail against His Church.

The Popes, the Bishops of Rome, are the successors of St. Peter. History attests that Peter came to Rome and there fixed his See. Thus it was that Rome could be called, as it was, "the Chair of Peter." From St. Peter's death his successors have governed the Church in his place, being not only Bishops of Rome but, because they were Peter's successors, heads also of the universal Church.

We have the testimony of history that the matter was understood thus by Christians from the earliest times. Pope St. Clement (died 97 AD), towards the end of the first century, wrote to the people of Corinth and expected them to obey (as he put it) what Our Lord said through him. St. Ignatius, the martyr (died 107 AD), speaks of the Church of Rome as the teacher of others. St. Ireneus (died 200) speaks of its pre-eminent authority and the need of every Church to agree with it on that account. "Peter has spoken thus through Leo," exclaimed the Bishops gathered in Chalcedon in the east in 451, when they heard Pope Leo's letter against the heretic Eutyches. In this they were but repeating what had been held by their predecessors as essential to true Christianity.

The same recognition of and submission to the Roman Pontiff was shown through the centuries and is shown still by the majority of Christians, who acknowledge the Pope as the successor of St. Peter and therefore as the supreme authority appointed by Christ over His Church.

(Footnote: In the middle of the 19th century, John Henry Newman, an Anglican Minister and the outstanding man at the University of Oxford at the time, became a Catholic and afterwards a priest and later was created a cardinal. His close study of history had shown him what the early Christian Church was like and he found that the only Christian group which could claim to be the same as it in his day was the Catholic Church. In some published notes of his, he says that if no more could be said for the Catholic Church than that Catholics obey the Pope, that alone would be enough to show it is the true Church, for Christ made St. Peter the head of His Church; the Pope is the successor of St. Peter and Catholics who are alone in their obedience to the Pope, alone accept Our Lord's arrangements in their entirety, submitting to the supreme authority He set over His Church. This is merely saying in another way what St. Ambrose said in the fourth century: "Where Peter is, there is the Church.")

THE INFALLIBILITY OF THE POPE

As well as having supreme authority in the Church, the Pope is infallible.

Here is the official statement of Catholic belief in the matter - "When he speaks 'ex Cathedra,'" (i.e., when, discharging his office of pastor and teacher of all Christians, in virtue of his supreme Apostolic authority, he defines doctrine concerning faith or morals to be held by the universal Church,) the Roman Pontiff enjoys that infallibility with which Our Divine Redeemer wished His Church to be endowed in defining doctrine concerning faith or morals."

When it is said that the Pope is infallible, this means simply that in certain well-defined circumstances the Pope cannot make a mistake. It does not mean that the Pope is impeccable or cannot commit a sin. It does not mean that the Pope is especially inspired by God what to say. It simply means that in the circumstances mentioned he is preserved by God from making a mistake

Although the Pope is infallible, he is not infallible in everything but only when he speaks "ex Cathedra" as it is called, and what that means is carefully explained. He is infallible "when discharging his office as pastor and teacher of all Christians, he defines doctrine concerning faith or morals to be held by the universal Church."

First, he must speak as the Supreme Pastor, the head of the universal Church. If he were giving an exhortation to people in a church in Rome as their bishop or if as a private theologian he wrote works on theology, he would not be infallible.

Then, he is infallible when, teaching as Supreme Pastor, he deals with some doctrine concerning faith - what we must believe as part of what God has made known to us - or concerning morals - what we must do as part of keeping God's law. He is not infallible in dealing with other matters, except they are so closely connected with religious truths that correct ideas concerning them are necessary to safeguard those religious truths.

Lastly, in addition to teaching as head of the Church and about matters of faith and morals, it is necessary, if the Pope is to speak infallibly, that he teach definitively, or in a way to determine the matter, something binding on all Christians. When these conditions are fulfilled, the Pope is infallible being preserved by God from error.

Our Lord made St. Peter the rock foundation on which His Church was to depend for stability. He and his successors would make it so firm that according to Our Lord's own promise "the gates of hell would not prevail against it." But if Peter or his successors could err when teaching as Supreme Pastor on matters of faith or morals to be held by all the faithful, then the Church would not remain firm and the forces of error and evil would certainly be prevailing against it.

To Peter and his successors were given the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven and the power to bind men in such a way that they would thereby be bound in the eyes of Heaven. But this could not be if Peter and his successors in their capacity of Supreme Pastor were able to teach men, as something they were bound to believe, what was wrong. God would never bind men to believe possible error. Our Lord made St. Peter the shepherd of His flock when He said to Peter, "Feed My lambs. Feed My sheep."

He appointed him and his successors supreme pastors of His Church. They have the office of feeding the flock with the word of truth. But if they were to err in the use of their supreme teaching authority they would not be feeding the flock as the Lord intended, but be administering to it the poisoned food of false doctrine. They would fail in what was essential to their pastor's office, if not infallible.

It is easy, then, to understand why bishops of the early Church regarded agreement with the Church Of Rome as the safe rule of faith and looked to the Pope as to the one who "stood on the firm rock of faith."

CONCLUSION

The following is a summary of what has been said:

From the facts of God's existence and man's receiving his life from God for some purpose connected with God's honour, it follows that man has a duty to do what God made him for - to honour God in God's way. Men left to themselves failed to find out adequately what was the purpose of their being and what their duty to God was.

As might have been expected from this, and as was necessary if God wished men to know truths about Himself quite beyond human power to discover, God made Himself known to men.

The final revelation of Himself was given when God became man.

He spent only a few short years teaching on earth and came in contact with comparatively few people, yet He plainly stated that what He had come to do and what He had to say were for the whole world. He demanded to be accepted by all.

He made provision to bring His voice to men till the end of time by founding His Church and setting up an authority in it to which He gave His Own divine power to teach and rule so that it became a duty on all who would accept Him to obey that authority even as it would obey Him.

The Catholic Church is that Church which Our Lord founded, still existing and to last till the end. Its bishops with the Pope at their head still exercise that authority - Christ's Own divine authority - which he vested in St. Peter and the other Apostles.

When, then, the bishops of the Catholic Church meet together with the Pope at their head and teach matters of faith or morals, or when scattered throughout the world they teach on such matters with one voice in union with the Pope, or when the Pope himself teaches "ex Cathedra," then do we know that it is the voice of Christ Our Lord we hear, and in that is there certainty of the truth.

It follows that, although every Catholic is encouraged to understand his faith as fully as possible and to see its reasonableness, yet it is enough for him to know merely that such and such a thing is the teaching of the Church in order to be assured of its truth, even as he sees that the Church's laws are not resting on any human authority but are, by Our Lord's Own arrangement, expressions of His Own divine will for His followers: for the authority in His Church is the authority of Christ Himself still exercised in the world.

The word of God made man, then, still comes with its fullness of truth and in all definiteness and clearness to the world through His Church.

To show by one's life that it is being heeded fully is, as well as being a duty, a sign of gratitude for possessing it. To try to bring others to know it is another such sign, which also makes one an apostle of Christ and particularly dear to His Divine Heart.
